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AUTHOR Buley-Meissner, Mary Louise
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ABSTRACT

Many teachers of basic writing are preoccupied with error. Before marking any errors in a student's composition, the teacher should read it carefully, try to understand the student's intention in writing it, and respond in those terms. Priorities for analysis should be consistent with the teacher's priorities for teaching and be set in terms of what will make the greatest difference in clarifying the student's communicative intentions. Analysis should also be framed in terms that will encourage the students to set their own goals for improvement. To be genuinely instructive, teachers need to be specific--about the strengths of their students' writing no less than the weaknesses. For students to become critics of their own writing, teachers should help the students remain objective in their impressions of their writing. Errors can be studied in the context of meaningful discourse through the use of individual conferences, a read/tape/playback/revise approach, and small group writing workshops. (HOD)

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Error Analysis in Basic Writing

by Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

Many teachers of Basic Writing are preoccupied with error. Few are able to strike a balance between overmarking and undermarking their students' work. Some teachers, concerned with setting high standards, mark--and ask their students to correct--all the errors they see. Others, anxious about encouraging their students' self-confidence, gloss over errors and point out only what they like. Both approaches are well-intentioned. But if we are concerned with intentions and effects--as all of us here today must be--then neither approach can be considered satisfactory.

Today I would like to explain 5 critical principles which have informed my own approach to error analysis in Basic Writing, an approach which I have used both in teaching composition and in training new teaching assistants at the University of Washington. I would like to convince you, in two ways, that preoccupation with error is unnecessary--and even counterproductive: first, by reviewing typical problems of Basic Writing instructors; second, by suggesting ways to make error analysis both more manageable for them and more beneficial for their students.

The first critical principle of error analysis is this: "Before you mark any errors in a student's composition, read it carefully, try to understand the student's intentions in writing it, and respond in those terms." As Sondra Perl has observed, many Basic Writers are so preoccupied with error that they begin editing almost from the moment they begin writing, before they have generated enough discourse to approximate the ideas they have. Afraid of making mistakes, they are unable to make meaning: unable to develop, shape, and structure their ideas, first for themselves and then

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for their readers. Perl and other researchers--among them, David Bartholomae, Andrea Lunsford, and Barry Kroll--also tell us that many of these students find it very difficult to imagine themselves as writers--and so they cannot write. That is, they cannot compose, they cannot integrate, in any authentic way, their experience and their language. The causes for this failure of imagination are many. One major cause is that teachers do not expect students' writing to be purposeful; yet they do expect it to be clear and correct.

For example, let me describe the recent performance of one new TA as he read one of the essays he'd just collected from his class. Hunched over his desk, concentrating intently, he drew precise circles, brackets, Xs, and arrows as his pencil moved methodically across and down each line. Then he sighed wearily, scratched a few lines at the bottom of the page, and picked up the next essay. "It looks like you're trying to mark those papers very carefully," I said, "What was that last one about anyway?" His response was unguarded: "I really don't know because I wasn't paying attention to that part of it. I'd have to read it again to find out."

Don't you think something is wrong--even radically wrong--there? As Mina Shaughnessy tells us in Errors and Expectations, "The single most important fact about Basic Writers is that although they have been talking everyday for a good many years, they have been writing infrequently, and then only in such strained and artificial situations that the communicative purpose of writing has rarely, if ever, seemed real." If we want "the communicative purpose of writing" to seem real to our students, then we must respect that purpose. We must try to understand--and develop and refine--their intentions before we ever try to correct their sentences.

This leads us to the second critical principle in error analysis: "When you set your priorities for analysis, be sure they are consistent with your own priorities for teaching." A frequent student complaint is that instructors say one thing and do another: They say in class that they value individuality, voice, organizational control, and so on; but when they mark papers, they point out only grammatical errors and poor word choices. This can be especially frustrating for minority students who notice that instructors mark their papers differently than they mark other students' papers. Last quarter, for example, one Asian student came to me with this complaint: "Every Thursday when our papers are handed back, I know just what to expect. My teacher always marks articles, prepositions, conjunctions, unidiomatic expressions, and verb endings. I do have problems with all that, but what about the rest of my paper? He tells everybody else if he likes their ideas or their points of view. What about me? I feel discouraged when I see the same things on my papers every week."

A conference with the instructor confirmed what I had suspected: he thought he was doing the student a favor by marking the papers as he did. But the student felt discriminated against. She wanted to learn just as much as everybody else--not just about articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. Of course we all know that not every student can make the same progress in a class. And we all know that for some students grammatical problems do recur from week to week. But that doesn't mean we have to confine our analysis to these problems alone. In fact I would like to suggest that rhetorical and structural analysis--at the discourse rather than the sentence level--is much more important to our students' development as writers in control of their writing.

The third principle of error analysis is: "Look for patterns of error, and then set your priorities for analysis in terms of what will make the greatest difference in clarifying the student's communicative intentions." As Shaughnessy has demonstrated, pattern of error at the sentence level tend to be more similar than different for many students, regardless of their language or dialect backgrounds. At the discourse level, cross-lingual or cross-dialectal errors also are important. Many Basic Writers have difficulty making the transition from highly contextualized speech situations to more formally structured writing situations. As a result their essays often seem unfocused, discursive, and repetitious. Ambiguous pronoun references, misued or missing transitional words, and abrupt changes in tense all contribute to this effect.

These errors--which cross sentence boundaries--deserve a high priority because they have a crucial effect on the general intelligibility of students' writing. Clear meaning and correct form are interdependent. An essay without a definite thesis or guiding plan is unlikely to be much improved if the student is told only to correct subject-verb disagreements and punctuation errors. What Carl Koch and James Brazil term "global concerns"--those related to essay focus, unity, and coherence--should be emphasized as much (or more) than other structural concerns at the paragraph or sentence level. Basic Writers need more--not less--instruction than other writers both in how to develop ideas and in how to structure those ideas for their readers.

The fourth principle of error analysis is directly related to the instructor's role in guiding the improvement of students' writing: "Set reasonable goals for improvement, and frame your analysis in terms that will encourage your students to set their own goals for improvement." Most of us recognize that errors are a necessary part of learning. We know that in mastering a new skill, we

have to practice and make mistakes. Yet sometimes we expect our students to learn without making mistakes. This expectation seems especially unrealistic when Basic Writers are trying to learn the complex skill of balancing the personal and intellectual demands of the rhetorical situation. They will make mistakes--no teacher can change that--but they also will make progress--if their teachers guide and encourage them in the right ways.

To be genuinely instructive, teachers need to be specific--about the strengths of their students' writing, no less than the weaknesses. Otherwise students cannot learn how to use and sharpen the skills they already have. Just last week, for example, one of my former students brought me the final essay he had written for another instructor. He wanted to know if I thought her evaluation was fair. It read: "Louis, you have done well this quarter. I know you worked hard. But I am disappointed that you did not learn to edit your work for the following problems..." A list of ten problems was attached, each of them illustrated by numerous examples from the student's work. This instructor's evaluation was "fair" in the sense of being accurate, but not in the sense of being reasonable to the student--who felt that his accomplishments had been ignored. As Louis himself said, "Why is it that teachers are so general about what we do right and so very specific about what we do wrong? It makes me feel like giving up this whole idea of ever being a writer."

Basic Writers usually are not self-confident. They know they are poor writers, and they are highly self-conscious about their errors. Pointing out all their problems, all quarter long, will only reinforce their sense of inadequacy. But noticing and praising whatever students do well--in the context of writing for a specific purpose and audience--can dramatically change their attitudes, expectations, and performance. Once students believe that they can write,

they will want to write better. They will set their own goals for improvement, so long as their teacher acknowledges their progress.

Since we are concerned with teaching our students to become critics of their own writing, then the last principle of error analysis may be the most important. "In as many ways as possible, help your students to objectify their impressions of their writing." Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, and Patrick Hartwell all have emphasized that for Basic Writers, learning to <u>see</u> is a crucial part of learning to compose. As some of you have probably noticed in your own classes, when students read their writing aloud, they sometimes substitute correct forms of words, phrases, and even sentences for the incorrect forms in their essays--usually without being aware that they are doing so. In effect, they impose schemes or patterns of meaning on their texts. They do not see what they have written; they see what they intended to write. This means their grammatical competence is demonstrated only when they read. The teacher's responsibility, then, is to discriminate between errors caused by the physical and conceptual demands of writing itself, and those related to individual linguistic competence. (For example, many students who omit verb endings--particularly <u>ed</u> and <u>s</u>--when they write, automatically supply the necessary endings when they read. Their tacit awareness of grammatical signals indicates that they need help in reading itself, not simply proofreading.)

As Shaughnessy tells us, "once (the Basic Writer) can objectify his own page, his errors disappear with dramatic speed." Instructors can help their students in individual conferences, listening to them read and helping them to see the differences between their reading and writing. They also can ask their students to work with tape recorders when they compose, a method frequently used in writing labs. By using a read/tape/playback/revise approach, students

can learn to identify the characteristic problems of their own composing styles. Best of all, I think, teachers can organize small group writing workshops in their own classes. These workshops can help students to analyze words on the page, to see what they have written, to identify their own errors. Furthermore, they encourage Basic Writers to study their errors in the context of meaningful discourse, in relationship to concerns of audience and intention, purpose and structure. In writing workshops, teachers as well as students soon realize that error analysis finally is inseparable from textual and rhetorical analysis.

I hope this presentation has convinced you that error analysis can be manageable for teachers and genuinely instructive for students. Our attitudes toward error definitely shape our students' attitudes toward error. If we see errors as part of learning, our students will too. Fluency first, then correctness: those should be our priorities.

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